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## URBAN-SUBURBAN PARTNERSHIPS

**Problem:** Urban congregations often have great needs, but lack the human and financial resources available in suburban congregations.

**Solution:** Partnerships between urban and suburban congregations match resources with needs and create opportunities for interaction among people of diverse backgrounds.

The Front Porch Alliance (FPA) was created by Indianapolis mayor Stephen Goldsmith to encourage religious organizations to improve their neighborhoods. The Alliance pursued this mission in part by promoting partnerships between urban and suburban congregations.

In October 1999, FPA sponsored a luncheon that attracted about 100 people, representing several dozen congregations. On its Web page, FPA declared that "a strong movement toward urban-suburban partnerships is occurring," and advised readers to watch for future updates regarding the initiative.

But there would be no updates. FPA was created by a Republican administration, and in November, the Republican mayoral candidate, Sue Anne Gilroy, lost her election bid to succeed Goldsmith. Most of the Alliance's staff sought jobs elsewhere. They have not been replaced. In the new administration, a truncated version of the Alliance survives under the umbrella of the Department of Metropolitan Development.

The history of the Front Porch Alliance is similar to that of many urban-suburban partnerships. They form because of the vision of one or two people; they flourish because of the energy and focus of this leadership; and they dissolve when the leadership loses interest or moves on. A few survive for several years, or even decades, but these are rare. Congregational partnerships of any kind are scarce, and the future of those that now exist is impossible to predict.

Attendance at the Front Porch Alliance's luncheon in October was impressive, but Jeanne Huiett, co-pastor of There is Hope Church on the near east side, described the meeting as somewhat forced and awkward. The tendency, she said, was for "people to sit near people they already know."

Del Bock, pastor of The Christian Center on the city's southeast side, and a featured speaker at the meeting, agrees that there was little immediate result from the luncheon. Yet he believes the Alliance gave momentum to a movement that ultimately will be revolutionary. "Whether there's an organization like the Front Porch Alliance to facilitate this thing," he said, "that doesn't change what's in my heart."

Bock envisions a broad-based partnership between numerous congregations, urban and suburban. It might involve a merger of several small congregations, forming one large church with a mission to serve the entire city—particularly the urban core. Or it might involve a collaboration between several autonomous churches, banding together to support a multi-purpose activity center in the inner city. This center, in addition

to holding religious services, would provide recreation facilities, poverty relief, and education—and it would seek to reach people from all over the city.

"The wheels that were set in motion last year are still turning," Bock said. "The churches are very serious about doing something together, because we have learned that we're not effective when we're separate. We do a few little things—we paint some houses or pay someone's rent. That's fine, but it's scattered. Give us three months, and you will see a core of cooperating and participating churches, with people, ideas, money, and time—all of these things coming together. We want to see total community transformation."

Bock's vision for a broad-based partnership may or may not translate into action. Skeptics can point to false starts and unfulfilled dreams—endeavors that started with much promise, but then vanished without a trace. Yet dreams do sometimes become a reality.

## THREE INDIANAPOLIS EXAMPLES

Following are the stories of three congregations engaged in partnerships with other congregations. None of these are so elaborate as what Bock envisions, but are representative of the kind of partnerships that most congregations have the energy and resources to pursue.

There is Hope Christian/College Park Baptist and Southwood Assembly of God

Jeanne Huiett and her husband, James, founded There is Hope Christian Church in July 1999, and serve as its co-pastors. The church grew out of a Saturday "Kids' Church" program at Brookside Park.

The park program, a collaboration among several congregations, offers food, contemporary Christian music, and recreational activities. Most of the children who participate in Kid's Church live in the poor neighborhoods near Brookside Park.

Jeanne Huiett, a teacher in the program, developed friendships with several of the children and their families, and wanted to work more closely with them. This desire led to the founding of There is Hope at 1205 East New York St., in a building that was formerly an auction house.

Numerous small churches were already established in the area, but the poverty of the east side far outstrips their capacity to help people. The Huietts wanted to address the needs of the area, not only spiritually, but economically.

Huiett describes There is Hope as being a "crisis relief agency" as well as a church. It provides formerly homeless people—who have recently found shelter—with basic goods such as utensils, bed frames and large appliances. There is Hope also houses other services, including a food and clothing pantry.

There is Hope has a large warehouse that is consistently full, because of the partnerships that Huiett has formed with churches on opposite ends of the city—College Park Baptist on the north side, and Southwood Assembly of God on the south. Both churches send donations regularly—truckloads full of food and clothes, toys, children's books and tapes, furniture, and appliances that their members have donated or collected.

Huiett said that these informal partnerships grew out of relationships she formed while involved with other projects; and both have become an integral part of what the Huietts hope to do through their church.

"Frankly, every inner-city church is soon going to need the support of suburban churches," Jeanne said. "Just to have the friendship alone is a real benefit. God is bringing the church universal together, into one family."

Speedway Christian/Door of Hope Church of the Nazarene

A year ago, Speedway Christian and Door of Hope Nazarene, both on the west side, began collaborating on a youth program called Seeds of Hope—a program that came about primarily because of the pastors' wives.

Both worked as teachers in an elementary school, and as they became friends, they agreed that they should collaborate on something. They decided on a youth program to be housed at Door of Hope's facility at 2132 W. Michigan St, which, though old, is a large facility with a gym.

The program begins each Monday at 5:30 p.m. with a meal. About 6 p.m., the children begin breaking up into four groups based on their grade in school, from kindergartners to high school seniors. Each group gets 20 to 25 minutes of recreation time in the gym. The remainder of their time—about an hour—is spent in a classroom, listening to a Bible lesson or doing crafts and other activities.

Speedway Christian provides the core group of volunteers to support this program—about six regulars, with several more attending less regularly. Two other west side congregations, Lynhurst Baptist and Westlake Church of Christ, also participate by providing volunteers. On any given night, 15 to 20 volunteers and 50 to 80 children show up for the program.

The churches are different in many ways. Door of Hope is an African-American church in a poor neighborhood. Speedway Christian is a white church in the solidly middle-class town of Speedway. And the churches belong to denominations with very different theological views.

Volunteers from the three other participating churches emphasize religious conversion more than those from Speedway Christian, who tend to stress the importance of living a moral life. But these differences have not been a major barrier. The teachers prepare their own material, and no one checks to ensure that it conforms to a particular dogma.

The problems that the churches have encountered center on how the program should operate—whether it should be tightly structured or free-flowing. Adam Kirtley, Speedway's associate pastor, described this as a cultural divide. Speedway Christian has wanted to impose a more rigid structure on the program, while Door of Hope has preferred to keep the structure relaxed.

Bridging this difference has proved difficult. On several occasions over the last year, the leaders of the program have reached a breaking point—that is, they have cancelled the program for the week and called the workers together to discuss its future. They've done "resuscitation" on it, as Kirtley put it.

After a year of operation, the churches seem to have reached a workable compromise, and the programming "is running as smoothly as it ever has." Still, Kirtley said, Seeds of Hope isn't what some people hoped it would be, or what it might become. It doesn't reach out to entire families, for example, and it's in operation just one evening each week.

"The up side is that we're giving these kids two hours a week of structure in their lives and positive influence," Kirtley said. "The down side is that we're giving them only two hours a week—time to get a free meal and play some basketball. On any given day, you can look at the same set of facts and feel differently about them. There's so much potential there, and it's hard not to feel good about it. But on some level, it's getting harder to show up every Monday. It's stressful and chaotic, and you wonder whether you're making any difference."

Kirtley and others hope that the program will be the seed of something much larger—for example, a community center open all day, offering a wide range of services and activities.

#### Metro Church/Eastview Vineyard Fellowship

Sharyn Cheek, pastor of Metro Church, says that her goal is to carry out the vision of the church's former pastor, her late husband. Cheek became Metro's pastor after his death seven years ago. At that time, Metro had about 700 members and was growing. Since then, it has fallen to fewer than 200 members. But within the last couple of years, Cheek said, she has discovered the energy and determination to revive her husband's vision.

Metro is unusually active for a church with 200 members. In 1993, at the height of its growth, Metro added a new sanctuary to its facility at 5815 East 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, which brought the church to 88,000 square feet.

Through its Reach Out and Restore ministry, Metro helps people who are making the transition from welfare

to work, by offering education in secretarial and computer skills and by helping with job searches. Metro also houses Hip-Hop Haven, a Friday night youth program where about 150 teens come to play non-violent video games, eat snacks, dance, and hang out with their friends.

Metro recently began a transitional housing program for homeless women. The program has space for 12 women, but at present serves five. It will give them a place to stay for up to two years, and provide mentors to assist them in getting back on their feet.

"I've found that a lot of people in this situation don't have a strong family support network," Cheek said, "so they need moral support from people who care about them. We're learning more about how important that is."

Metro is in the process of working out a partnership with Eastview Vineyard Fellowship, near Greenfield. Eastview's pastor, Buddy Baird, used to attend her husband's church. She tried to get Baird interested in the Front Porch Alliance's urban-suburban partnership discussion last fall, but the idea did not connect with him when it was presented in the abstract.

What sparked Baird's interest was his recent tour of the Metro ministry. "When he came and saw with his eyes, it made a total difference in his attitude," Cheek said. "Sometimes, seeing helps."

Baird and Cheek worked out a date for an open house at Metro, so that anyone from Eastview who was interested could tour it. In the meantime, Baird began telling his congregation about Metro's work, and Cheek's assistant visited Eastview to make a presentation about Metro's vision for its future.

The partnership will probably involve regular financial help, Baird said, but Eastview will also provide volunteers to serve as mentors in the transitional housing program. "It's a tremendous opportunity for our people to use their talents," Baird said. "It allows people to see, in a practical way, that they can help people and live out their faith. That's very exciting."

## BRIDGING THE DISTANCE

The biggest obstacle to the startup of urban-suburban partnerships is geographic distance. Leaders who never meet will never start a partnership, and unless they are connected by denominational ties, there are few opportunities for pastors of urban and suburban congregations to mingle.

Even a strong relationship between pastors does not guarantee a partnership's success. It is equally important that congregations develop a sense of ownership and commitment.

"The most important thing to remember about church staff is that we probably have more power to keep things from happening than to make them happen," said George Davis, pastor of St. Mark's United Methodist Church in Carmel. "First, there has to be a staff-to-staff relationship. That seems to be a prerequisite. There also has to be cooperation among lay people."

For several years, St. Mark's has been involved in a partnership with Vida Nueva United Methodist Church, a Hispanic congregation on the near east side. The partnership is multi-faceted. St. Mark's allows Vida Nueva to conduct a Spanish-language service in its building each Sunday evening, making Vida Nueva more accessible to Hispanics on the north side. Together, the churches publish a liturgical calendar, with the prayers printed in Spanish and English. They also conduct several joint activities each year—a combined service, a lunch, and a Christmas party, among others.

St. Mark's also provides occasional, unbudgeted financial assistance to Vida Nueva, and the issue is sensitive. The psychology of partnering is the greatest challenge once partnerships are established. The crucial question is this: How can a suburban congregation enter into a partnership with an urban congregation, without turning it into a paternalistic relationship?

"The issue in these partnerships is that one congregation has certain kinds of resources," Davis said. "The struggle is to get beyond that and to understand what people have to offer each other. In some ways, it's

a parable of the whole culture: whoever has the wealth is judged to be in power. And at some level, they are. But what you have a chance to discover in a partnership is that money is not the last word, or even the best definition of what people have to give each other. That's a struggle for any partnership—to understand one another as persons, as children of God, and as brothers and sisters."

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church at 34<sup>th</sup> Street and Park Avenue has struggled with this issue from the other end—as the urban church in an urban-suburban partnership. Our Redeemer has a long-established relationship with Pilgrim Lutheran in Carmel, and is developing a relationship with Resurrection Lutheran on the city's south side. Resurrection plans to help Our Redeemer implement a new "drop-in" center for the Mapleton-Fall Creek neighborhood, possibly offering a workout room, televisions, games, and food.

Resurrection plans to help out with this project financially, but it will also contribute volunteers and expertise. Lyle McKee, pastor of Our Redeemer, said he would not enter into the partnership if only a transfer of money were involved.

"There is still a perception on the part of suburban congregations that what they have to offer, mostly, is money," McKee said. "But, the way I see it, suburban churches have another set of skills to contribute to the mix. They no doubt have accountants; they might have an engineer and an architect. Those would be good assets to bring to a conversation between churches. But if we're developing a new ministry, and if you're just going to throw money at it, then I don't want that help."

## REASONS FOR PARTNERING

Despite the obstacles to urban-suburban partnerships, congregations do attempt them—often from a sense of obligation to a specific church or neighborhood. Pilgrim Lutheran's partnership with Our Redeemer dates to the 1950s, when the latter donated money and members to help found Pilgrim on the rapidly growing north side. Because it is a "daughter church" of Our Redeemer, Pilgrim feels a sense of obligation to the older church.

Similarly, Bethesda Temple Apostolic Church recently partnered with First Baptist Church, North Indianapolis, on a summer computer education program for youth. For 40 years, Bethesda was located near First Baptist on the near west side. When Bethesda moved to 6205 North Michigan Rd. in 1993, the church wanted to show its former neighbors that it hadn't forgotten them.

"What excited me about it was the idea of giving back to our community," said Bryan Kennie, director of community outreach at Bethesda, "because it was a chance to reach back and have an impact on a church that people might never expect us to communicate with."

In other cases, partnerships are created out of a sense that, although they are far removed geographically, urban and suburban congregations ultimately share a common future. If they are interconnected, one cannot be healthy if the other is dying.

David Schreiber, pastor of Resurrection Lutheran, said that members of his congregation recently learned this while working on a housing project near downtown. The work involved nearly all of Resurrection's congregation, and Schreiber said that the project helped his people realize that "the spiritual health of the city is connected to the economic health of its people." He believes Resurrection's evolving partnership with Our Redeemer will give members the opportunity to build relationships that keep this awareness alive.

McKee, of Our Redeemer, agrees that partnerships have the potential to foster a broader social vision, and he believes that unity across geographic, cultural, and theological divides is no longer just an "option." Given the size and urgency of the challenges facing congregations, cooperation is mandatory.

"We simply can't permit this kind of divide to persist within the body of Christ," McKee said. "We've got to be about the mission of the gospel together. There's so much provincialism in the church, so much prejudice, racism, and fear. These kinds of partnerships provide the opportunities—which the church almost uniquely provides—to pull together people who would not otherwise be at the same table."

## **POINTS TO REMEMBER:**

- Partnerships between urban and suburban congregations often come about from a sense of loyalty to a specific neighborhood or congregation, or from a sense of the interconnectedness of the whole city.
- Partnerships typically form because of the energy and vision of one or two leaders, not from the initiative of lay people; many result from an established friendship between clergy.
- Geographic distance can be an obstacle to partnerships, but there are often theological and cultural barriers to overcome as well.
- An on-site visit moves the partnering process along more effectively than abstract discussion.
- A partnership that involves only financial aid, and that is paternalistic in spirit, is likely to create resentment. Making the partnership truly a partnership, not just a mission outreach by the wealthier congregation, is crucial.

## **CONTACTS & RESOURCES:**

Bethesda Temple Apostolic Church  
P.O. Box 68224  
Indianapolis, IN 46268  
(317) 726-1399

The Christian Center  
1825 S. Franklin Rd.  
Indianapolis, IN 46239  
(317) 359-1990

College Park Baptist Church  
2606 W. 96<sup>th</sup> St.  
Indianapolis, IN 46268  
(317) 875-0282

Door of Hope Church of the Nazarene  
2132 W. Michigan St.  
Indianapolis, IN 46222  
(317) 264-9622

Eastview Vineyard Fellowship  
1672 N. 600 West Rd.  
Greenfield, IN 46140  
(317) 894-3280

Metro Church  
5815 E. 42<sup>nd</sup> St.  
Indianapolis, IN 46226

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church  
3421 N. Park Ave.  
Indianapolis, IN 46205  
(317) 925-3588

Pilgrim Lutheran Church  
10202 N. Meridian St.

Indianapolis, IN 46290  
(317) 846-2221

Resurrection Lutheran Church  
445 E. Stop 11 Rd.  
Indianapolis, IN 46227  
(317) 881-7854

St. Mark's United Methodist Church  
4780 E. 126<sup>th</sup> St.  
Carmel, IN 46033  
(317) 846-4912

Southwood Assembly of God  
8700 S. Meridian St.  
Indianapolis, IN 46217  
(317) 882-9101

Speedway Christian Church  
5110 W. 14<sup>th</sup> St  
Indianapolis, IN 46224  
(317) 244-7656

There is Hope Christian Church  
1205 E. New York St.  
Indianapolis, IN 46202  
(317) 955-0358

Vida Nueva United Methodist Church  
2601 E. New York St.  
Indianapolis, IN 46219  
(317) 636-2819

With federal funds now available to religious organizations, the opportunities for urban-suburban partnering are greater than ever. Two Web sites are of particular relevance:

Faith Works, the state of Indiana's program to encourage faith-based initiatives, can be found at [www.state.in.us/fssa/faithworks](http://www.state.in.us/fssa/faithworks). Faith Works can also be reached by calling 1 (800) 599-6043.

An important resource for information about what other congregations are doing is maintained by the Welfare Information Network, at [www.welfareinfo.org](http://www.welfareinfo.org). See in particular the page "faith-based involvement," at [www.welfareinfo.org/faithbase.htm](http://www.welfareinfo.org/faithbase.htm), which has links of interest to congregations looking to partner with government agencies and with other congregations.

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